

From the Society
by SCOTT MEREDITH

Identifying African American Resources Project

The African American presence in Montana is an understudied aspect of the state's history, one that the Montana Historical Society (MHS) is working to better document through the Identifying African American Resources Project funded by a 2005–7 Montana Cultural Trust grant. During the first phase of the project, historians, staff, and volunteers combed the MHS collections looking for manuscripts, oral histories, newspaper articles, artifacts, census records, and photographs that told the stories of the state's African American residents. The biographical and bibliographic databases created will eventually allow the public to quickly and easily find and use these resources.¹

Although the project's findings are still preliminary, a comparison of two key censuses—the territory's very first census taken in 1870 and the 1910 census, when the state's black population was at its largest—provides a glimpse of two very different

generations. The 1870 census enumerated 183 African Americans out of a total population of over 20,000.² In some regards, the demographics of this 1 percent mirrored that of the territory's white population in the post-Civil War period. Men living without women or children made up the majority of the population and most residents lived near places whose fortunes were tied to transportation or mining. Although African Americans settled in nearly every part of the territory, most lived in Helena (43 percent), Virginia City (10.4 percent), Fort Benton (8.9 percent), Bozeman (7.8 percent), and Deer Lodge County (7.3 percent). Many emigrated from the border states of Missouri and Kentucky, but other states—and, surprisingly, countries such as Bermuda, Jamaica, Haiti, and Nova Scotia—were also represented.³ In these early years, African Americans worked in a range of occupations. A partial breakdown of occupations includes servants and domestics (23 percent), laborers (19 percent),



A. B. Coe, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

As part of the Identifying African American Resources Project, researchers combed the Montana Historical Society's collections looking for all manner of records and material culture relating to the state's African Americans. The men pictured here belonged to the Tenth Cavalry that escorted General Wesley Merritt's hunting party. They posed at lunchtime at St. Mary's Lake in 1894. The only soldier identified is Robert H. Johnson of Milledgeville, Kentucky, in the center with his hand on the bottle.

Walter R. Dorsey first appears in the Helena city directory in 1892. He ran a restaurant, worked at the Montana Club, then in 1898 opened a grocery store. He moved his successful business to 900 Eighth Avenue in 1905, where he worked and resided until he died of pneumonia at age forty-one on New Year's Eve in 1907. Here he is pictured in front of his store with two of his daughters and an unidentified worker. After his death, his widow Almira and several extended family members ran the store until 1932. The building still stands, home to the Wise Penny antique and consignment shop.



Edward Reimig, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



H. J. Lowry, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

This train excursion from Helena, shown stopped at Coeur d'Alene summit on August 21, 1891, featured black musicians, who appear almost hidden in the center of the crowd.



This school group assembled at Fort Keogh in 1891 includes five African American children.

barbers (17 percent), cooks (14 percent), and farm or ranch workers (4 percent). Several were “gulch miners” in Unionville and Silver Creek near Marysville.⁴

Census records also show the presence of African American and “mixed-blood” children. In 1870, approximately 17 percent of Montana’s African American population was under the age of sixteen. One of the project’s exciting finds was the family of longtime fur trade worker Henry Mills. The Kentucky-born Mills lived with his Blackfeet wife Phillisy and their daughter Mary in a Fort Benton neighborhood populated mostly by mixed-blood families. And the Millses were only one of a number of African American–Native American families who called Montana home.

Among the families revealed in the 1910 census was the family of Crow language interpreter and U.S. marshal Charles “Smoky” Wilson who lived with his wife Pine Fire and toddlers John E. and Manuelita on the Crow Indian Reservation.

The black presence in Montana grew in the late 1800s and early 1900s and by 1910 over two thousand blacks lived in Montana. As in earlier times,

unmarried males over the age of fourteen made up the majority of the community, with 56 percent of men counted as single, divorced, or widowed in 1910. By this time, however, families contributed to strong and active African American communities in Helena, Butte, Anaconda, Missoula, and the Great Falls area as well as smaller communities in White Sulphur Springs, Harlowton, and Forsyth. African American families were also found at Fort Assiniboine and Fort Missoula and amid the ranks of Montana homesteaders. One



J. P. Ball & Son, photographers, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

African American photographer J. P. Ball owned a studio in Helena for several years, specializing in portraits of clients, black and white, and pictures of local events, including the laying of the Montana State Capitol cornerstone (p. 96). His portraits, like this one of an unidentified boy, provide evidence of a thriving, fashionable African American population.

homesteader was Major D. Brockman, a Kentucky-born widower who had left his family’s Missouri farm for the Dakota Territory quartz mines by 1880. In 1896, he lived in Idaho, where a son, Daniel, was born, and by 1910 he was farming in Dawson County, Montana. The elder Brockman received a homestead patent for 320 acres in Beaverhead County in 1920 when he was seventy-eight years old.

The majority of early-twentieth-century African Americans in Montana worked in the service sector, with the largest percentage (16.5 percent) employed as laborers. Men earned wages as “porters” (a term

usually applied to doormen, maintenance men, and manual laborers), ranch workers, miners, chimney-sweeps, and janitors. Women worked as domestic servants, cooks, seamstresses, and homemakers. In Deer Lodge, African Americans worked at the Montana State Prison as launderers, cooks, and bakers and as a turnkey and a “bathman.”

Unsurprisingly, most blacks held jobs in the employ of whites (both families and private clubs in Butte and Helena employed chauffeurs, cooks, maids, and servants), but a number held professional positions as well. African Americans made their livings as ministers, musicians, and nurses; a black physician maintained a practice in Helena as did a black lawyer in Libby. A few African American males even found work as masseurs in Butte, Missoula, and Hunter’s Hot Springs. And though business ownership was not widespread among African Americans, black-owned businesses were found in Jordan, Libby, and Forsyth among other turn-of-the-century settlements. Barbershops remained a popular enterprise, and many women ran boardinghouses or were self-employed as seamstresses or laundresses. A small number of women found employment as prostitutes in Butte (and one in Wibaux). One of the most intriguing discoveries was the Afro-American Mining and Milling Co. in Butte, founded in 1906 by a long-time Butte miner-pro prospector, a barber-newspaper editor, porters, and an African American physician from New York City and incorporated at \$200,000.⁵

Project researchers extended their search beyond census records as well. For instance, the MHS Photograph Archives yielded many images of and photographs taken by African Americans. These include the photographs by Helena’s J. P. Ball & Son, which, in both individual and family portraits, make tangible the everyday experience of African Americans. Photos of black musicians playing for a railroad outing in western Montana, of schoolchildren at Fort Keogh, and of Taylor Gordon’s family in White Sulphur Springs all point to the same kinds of joys and frustrations that characterized day-to-day life for all Montanans. The images reveal that by and large African



Detail, W. Preston Wright, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Here the Union Bethel A.M.E. congregation of Great Falls participates in a “Tom Thumb wedding,” a type of church fundraiser that began in the early 1900s. The mock wedding of children dressed in formal attire was based on the wedding of well-known P. T. Barnum circus performer Tom Thumb and his bride Lavinia Warren who wed in 1863.



The religious, cultural, and political contributions of African American women from around Montana, who gathered in Butte on August 3, 1921, for the first convention of the Montana Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, would make a rich topic for further research.

Zubick Art Studio, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



Emma Riley Harris Smith posed at Spring Creek, near Lewistown, circa 1920, with her daughters (left to right): Madeline, Lucille, and Alma. Madeline (Clark) later lived in California, but Lucille (Thompson) and Alma (Jacobs) raised families and pursued library careers in Montana.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



MHS Museum, Helena



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

This unidentified trumpet player, an airman from Great Falls Air Force Base (renamed Malmstrom in 1956), performed for KXLX's new television camera at the station's Great Falls studio in 1952.

are a 1920s-era federation cookbook and state and regional convention pamphlets that include biographical information about members and their families.

While these findings are significant in themselves, they also highlight the primary motivation behind the project: to make more visible an understudied group of Montanans by identifying who they were and where they lived through the census reviews and at the same time identify associated documents, manuscripts, photographs, and objects for future research. By August 2006, information relating to nearly two thousand African Americans had been gathered and recorded in a database that will be an invaluable tool for scholars, students, and genealogists.

However, given the wide range of sources in the MHS collections, it was quickly evident to researchers that a complete inventory of MHS's African American materials would be impossible within the grant's parameters. This first phase of the Identifying African American Resources Project must necessarily be followed by a second effort if a more

The presence of images such as those found in the family collection of White Sulphur Springs resident and musician Taylor Gordon reveals that African Americans made a place for themselves in Montana. Was this unidentified man, whose photograph was taken in Anaconda circa 1925, a family member or friend?



s. Theodore Melander, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Americans made a place for themselves in the state. If racial equality remained elusive—and the collections document that bitter prejudice existed—there is also evidence that in Montana African Americans felt they had as much of a chance to make good here as in many other places in early-twentieth-century America.

Evidence of that attitude can be seen in the pride of the African American commercial and civic organizations that sprang up across the state. The Montana Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, established in 1921, allowed women to form a social networks across the state. Among the materials in the MHS collections

comprehensive assembly of materials is to be drawn. Future grants will continue this important work not only at the Montana Historical Society but throughout the state. As rich as the MHS holdings are, there is still more to discover in local historical societies and museums and personal memories.

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MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Union Depot, Northern Pacific Railroad, Helena

(and present) Montana Club (1904) on Sixth Avenue, New York's Woolworth Building (1913), and the U.S. Supreme Court (1934).

3. Axline, Baumler, and Hampton, "Helena Railroad Depot Historic District," sec. 8, pp. 7, 8.

4. A branch of the Great Northern Railway also ran through Helena, with its 1912 depot at the intersection of Neill and Fuller avenues, but little evidence of its existence remains. Stone and brick warehouses on Front Street and the narrow gable-front residences on Getchell Street are the only obvious remnants of the area's association with the railroad.

5. Kingston Heath, "False-Front Architecture on Montana's Urban Frontier," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture III*, ed. Thomas Carter and Bernard Herman (Columbia, Mo., 1989), 199, 200.

6. *Polk City Directory* (Helena, Mont., 1890). The designated wards coincided with the 1890 census enumeration districts.

7. Ellen Baumler and Dave Shors, *Lost Places, Hidden Treasures: Rare Photographs of Helena, Montana* (Helena, Mont., 2002), 56-61; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Population.

8. Baumler and Shors, *Lost Places, Hidden Treasures*, 57-60.

9. As Anne Grimer explains, "The introduction of the many revival styles of architecture around the turn of the twentieth century, combined with the improvement and increased availability of portland cement resulted in a 'craze' for stucco as a building material in the United States . . . beginning about 1890 and gaining momentum into the 1930s and 1940s." *Preservation Brief 22: The Preservation and Repair of Historic Stucco* (Washington, D.C., 1990), 2.

10. Axline, Baumler, and Hampton, "Helena Railroad Depot Historic District," sec. 8, p. 8.

11. Ellen Baumler and Jon Axline, "Historic and Architectural Inventory Form, 1505 Railroad Avenue," copy in SHPO files; Formica advertisement reprinted from August 1943 *Architectural Record*, in *Twentieth Century Building Materials: History and Conservation*, ed. Thomas C. Jester (New York, 1995), 126.

12. Michael A. Tomlan, "Building Modern America," in Jester, *Twentieth Century Building Materials*, 42.

Identifying African American Resources Project

1. The project benefited greatly from the work of William L. Lang, Glenda Riley, Quintard Taylor, Ken Robison, Lucille Thompson and Alma Jacobs, and Jodie Foley. In many cases, project researchers simply followed up on sources these scholars had already identified, and in the end the database reflects their work as much as it does that of project staff. See, for instance, William L. Lang, "Helena, Montana's Black Community, 1900-1912," and Glenda Riley, "American Daughters: Black Women and the West," in *African Americans on the Western Frontier*, ed. Monroe Billington and Roger Hardaway (Niwot, Colo., 1998); Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier* (New York, 1998); and Quintard Taylor and Shirley Anne Wilson Moore, eds., *African American Women Confront the West: 1600-2000* (Norman, Okla., 2003). Ken Robison has published several articles about Montana's African Americans in the *Fort Benton (Mont.) River Press* and *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune*. These can be accessed through his blog, <http://www.fortbenton.blogspot.com>. See also Lucille Thompson and Alma Jacobs, *The Negro in Montana, 1900-1945:*

A Selective Bibliography (Helena, Mont., 1970). Jodie Foley has compiled an excellent bibliography of many of the primary materials available at MHS that can be accessed at <http://www.his.state.mt.us/research/library/pamphlets/african.asp>

2. The project documented 191 African American individuals living in Montana in 1870. The disparity between the census figures and this number may be due to the problematic "mixed blood" status enumerators recorded for some residents. The question of race—and the assignment of racial categories—lies at the base of this project. Throughout, consideration was given to how people described themselves and each other on the basis of skin color. For instance, the work with census records required understanding how enumerators dealt with racial identity, for in both 1870 and 1910 census workers in different parts of Montana variously classified people as "black," "colored," and "mulatto." For the purposes of this project, anyone identified as black or mixed black was added to the database.

3. Christian McMillen, "Border State Terror and the Genesis of the African-American Community in Deer Lodge and Chouteau Counties, Montana, 1870-1890," *Journal of Negro History*, 79 (Spring 1994), 212-47.

4. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census of the United States: Montana; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census, 1910: Montana. Microfilm copies of this census material are available at the Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena.

5. This \$200,000 would be nearly \$4.5 million in 2005 dollars according to the Consumer Price Index.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Capitol cornerstone, photograph by J. P. Ball, July 4, 1889